

MILITARY REPORT

by Bob Newton

O-2 FORWARD AIR CONTROLLER

We fly a strike mission with the California ANG

One of the legendary figures to emerge from the Vietnam Conflict was the forward air controller, or FAC. Often flying his unarmed O-1E Bird Dog several hours daily, the FAC became intimately familiar with day-to-day activities on the ground in his assigned chunk of the war zone. He knew how many Vietnamese civilians should be in any one area and what they should be doing at any particular time of the day. If he detected unusual activity in the villages or fields, or a fluctuation in the local population, the area would be checked for possible VC troop movements. In a far more aggressive role, the FAC controlled fighter strikes against confirmed or suspected enemy positions, firing white phosphorus ("Willie Pete") rockets into the targets to mark their location and directing the fighters in their attacks.

To find out what the FAC is doing today, I visited the 163rd Tactical Air Support Group, a unit of the California Air National Guard, based at the Ontario International Airport, some 40 miles east of Los Angeles. The 163rd, commanded by Col. Lloyd Hutton, is charged with providing combat ready Guard crews to provide air and ground

forward air control to close air support aircraft. Subordinate units in the 163rd include the 196th Tactical Air Support Squadron, the flying unit, and the 163rd Air Support Operations Center, which processes and coordinates Army requests for air support. The group also has a communications and electronics squadron, aircraft maintenance squadron and a combat support squadron.

The 163rd is currently equipped with twin-engine Cessna O-2A Skymasters, but the history of the group, its traditions and the experience base of its pilots are in fighters. The unit came into being in 1946 as the 196th Fighter Squadron, as part of the California ANG. The 196th became one of the first ANG squadrons to receive jet fighters when it traded its original F-51s for 25 F-80 Shooting Stars in mid-1948. The squadron was called to active duty in October 1950 for the Korean Crisis and was re-equipped with F-84Es. On returning to the states and relocating to Ontario International, the 196th was once again assigned F-51s, which were flown until the unit received F-86As in 1954.

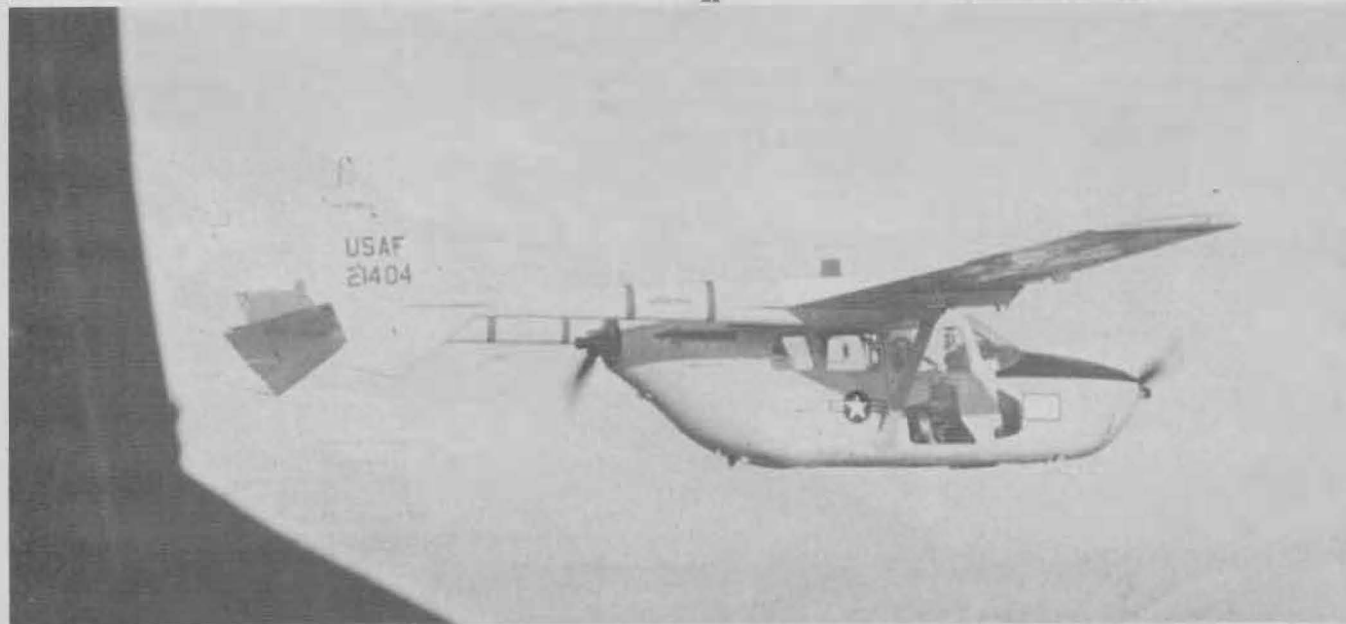
In 1958, the squadron was reorganized as the 163rd Fighter Interceptor

Group and became part of the North American Air Defense Command. The unit progressed through F-86D and L interceptors and in 1965, began a ten-year association with the F-102A. The unit was once again reorganized in 1975, this time under the Tactical Air Command, into the 163rd Tactical Air Support Group and equipped with the O-2.

The 196th TASS boasts considerable combat experience, especially for a former Air Defense Command Unit. On average, its pilots have more than 250 combat flying hours, including SEA tours in the F-102. Its depth of fighter experience is reflected in the fact that only five of the unit's 54 pilots have not logged fighter time. Much of the unit's combat experience comes from former TAC pilots who came on board after the transition to O-2s in 1975. They had previously flown the air strike mission in the F-100, F-4, F-5, A-7, A-37 and F-105.

As might be expected, the low and

Framed in the windscreen of another O-2, the lead plane shows the extra glass area in the right door and forward cabin section. There's another clear panel above the pilot's head.



Photography by the 163rd TASSGP, California ANG

slow O-2 does not exactly excite this group of pilots. And to a great degree, they question the effectiveness and survivability of their aircraft in a full blown war. "Sitting ducks" was the description they applied to themselves, but their enthusiasm for training to perform their mission in a professional manner somehow remains undiminished.

The FAC's role in the air today is similar to that of the O-1 pilots of 10-15 years ago over South Vietnam. He is still the airborne link to coordinate the Army's needs for airstrikes with the Air Force's ability to put the right kind of ordnance on the target. It remains the FAC's job to locate and identify the target, develop an attack plan, mark the target and direct the fighters in their attacks. His working environment, however, has become extremely more dangerous, while his inability to defend himself remains unchanged.

While FAC pilots still practice the tactics they would fly in a low-threat environment, the emphasis today is on training for the high-threat scenario. The proliferation of radar controlled anti-aircraft guns and surface-to-air missiles, including the shoulder-launched SA-7 SAM, and the growing Soviet ability to deploy these defensive weapons along a mobile front, make the FACs extremely cautious about exposing their aircraft any longer than necessary to perform the mission. Cruising at 135 knots, the O-2 is indeed a "sitting duck" to these modern defensive weapons.

One technique that has been developed to permit operations against heavily defended targets is the use of two aircraft, flying as a team: one high, operating in a safe zone back from the battle scene, and one low to direct the attacks and assess strike damage if feasible. The high FAC is the communications coordinator, relaying instructions and information to and from the low FAC, the fighters and any "friendly" on the ground.

After visiting with the 163rd and observing their operation on a Guard drill day, I was invited back by Lt. Col. John Riederich, commander of the 196th TASS, to fly with his unit. Unfortunately, our schedules crossed on an afternoon when only one O-2 would be flying, so I was not able to see the high/low FAC concept in practice. The lone O-2, Link 50, would be controlling a flight of A-4F Skyhawks, flown by Marine Corps reserve pilots from

attack squadron VMA-134, based at El Toro Marine Air Station, California.

Mission briefing with VMA 134 was conducted over the telephone. We would be working with a flight of two A-4s, armed with eight 5-inch Zuni ballistic rockets and 100 rounds of 20mm. Our fighters were Mike Fox 31 and 32, flown by Maj. Glen Takabayashi and Capt. Dave Kraft. Major Bob Deuel would be my pilot in the O-2, and we would be carrying ten marker rockets. After my final briefing by Lt. Col. Riederich and Maj. Deuel on what to expect, we trooped out to fly.

In spite of its civilian origin, the O-2 had a definite military look to it. First, of course, were the stars and bars and other Air Force markings on the exterior. Inside, the militarized Skymaster bore little resemblance to its civilian

counterpart. The panel was flat black and pure military: austere looking toggle switches, instead of modern rocker switches, guarded armament switches across the top of the panel and a firing button on the left yoke. There were only two seats in the Guard O-2. The FAC's job is to communicate, and the aft cabin was filled with radios needed to do the job: FM band, primarily for talking to ground units, and VHF and UHF for air-to-air work. There was also considerably more glass area along the right side of the aircraft and across the top of the front cabin area. A FAC

Before takeoff, armorers pull safety pins and check the security of the marker rockets. Note the pilots have their hands at the top of the cockpit—and away from the arming switches.



A 196th TASS O-2 flies formation with a flight of two Navy A-7s. The 196th trains with air units of all three services.

has to see, too. Other changes included the addition of four hard points under the wings to attach the seven-tube LAU-68 rocket launchers. The wings have also been strengthened to support the additional load.

The O-2s flown by the Guard came into service in 1967. They are powered by non-turbocharged engines, and their performance fully loaded in high-density altitude conditions is somewhat less than sterling, according to the pilots. The aircraft have no oxygen system, and operations are restricted to below 10,000 feet. After 13 years of service, including SEA time, the O-2s are well broken in. Total airframe time runs as high as 5700 hours among the Ontario unit's aircraft. Lt. Col. Blake LaMar, Deputy Commander for Operations for the group, said his plane sports 37 bullet hole patches and has experienced four gear-up landings (due to malfunctions).

Maj. Deuel and I took off from Ontario and climbed northward to 7500 feet to cross the mountains. Our target area was Leach Lake, a dry lake bed nestled between surrounding ridges in the Mojave Desert, north of Barstow, California.

The fighters had not arrived when we reached the target area, so we circled while Deuel pointed out specific targets. First was an airfield complex, with a runway scratched into the desert floor and airplanes (looked like T-33s, mostly) placed in revetments scattered along the periphery of the strip. Defending guns were placed in other revetments surrounding the airfield. Toward the opposite end of the dry lake lay our primary target, a SAM site, with multiple launcher locations and a radar control van perched on a nearby knoll. Further east, beyond the SAM site, a

truck park had been set up, the vehicles lined up in neat rows.

Our range time came, and Deuel transmitted on guard frequencies that the area was "hot." The Marines had not arrived yet, so we continued orbiting over the lake. Scraps of metal littered the ground, throwing shafts of reflected sunlight up at us like signal mirrors. The desert below appeared completely lifeless; not devastated like a battle zone, just naturally barren.

I thought the fighters might have aborted and our mission would be wasted, but Deuel didn't think so. "I have a feeling," he said positively. "They'll be here." Since Deuel spends much of his time operating in a technical world—left seat of the O-2 and right seat of a Continental Airlines 727—I decided his comment was not the result of just a gut feeling, but a judgment based on experience.

Eventually, with our range time nearly gone, ten Willie Petes still snug in their tubes and the Marines not yet coming over the hills, Deuel decided to start downloading the rockets. "Well, I'll show you how it's done, anyway," he said. A ridge of hills south of the SAM site would be our hideout. We dropped down to a few hundred feet over the desert floor, which now seemed even less hospitable than it had when we were orbiting the target area. This was the high-threat mission. We had to stay protected by the hills until the last possible minute.

We banked through a pass behind some low hills, reversed course and flew back past the rocky hillside. Deuel rolled hard to the right as we flew into the

A Marine A-4 from VMA 324 is shown firing a Zuni rocket.

clear, then leveled the wings with the Sam site dead ahead, pulled the nose up about 5 degrees, and triggered away the first rocket. He raised the nose a bit more and fired the second. The correct pitch angle to get the needed range from the rockets had been calculated before takeoff. Immediately he rolled into the evasive maneuver, but instead of completing the dive to the deck, he turned back toward the target so we could watch the rockets impact. It had only been seconds since he fired the rockets, but I expected to see the smoke from their impact rising in the still air. Nothing. Duds, I thought. Then the flash of a silent explosion, and a slender white cloud sprouted from the brown earth. Moments later, the second rocket hit. "Now I would tell the fighters where to look for the target: 100 meters from my southern mark, bearing 330 degrees."

"In a low-threat environment," Deuel said, "we would work in closer to the target." He picked the truck park for this demonstration. Arming another tube, he wheeled the O-2 over and around, and down we flew in a steep dive. The trucks grew rapidly in the windscreen, but boring straight in on the target, even for a short time, I felt that we would have been vulnerable to ground fire. For the O-2 to survive this kind of pass, the defenders of our target couldn't be armed with anything more sophisticated than small arms, and probably we still would have taken our lumps. Heavy caliber automatic guns would have chopped the O-2 to pieces. "About now," Deuel said, pressing the firing button. The rocket streaked away, and we pulled out of the dive.

"Link 50, Mike Fox 32." The A-4s were about ten minutes out, coming downhill in a hurry from their cruising altitude. With no one else apparently scheduled to use the range, Deuel decided we could control the A-4s for at least one pass. When the fighters arrived, Deuel directed them to their Initial Points (from which they would make their attacks) and gave them a target briefing. Meanwhile, we positioned ourselves for an abbreviated version of the high-threat marking sequence.

The fighters called IP. At their 480 knot run-in speed, they were only a little more than a minute out from the target. We rolled into that now-familiar pattern: nose up, one rocket fired; more pitch, and the second one was quickly away. Deuel pulled off to the side of the target so we could watch the action.

"Mike Fox 31's in the pop." I could not see the tiny A-4, but I knew that the pilot's call meant that he had pulled



McDonnell Douglas Co.

his fighter up from the deck, gaining altitude for his diving rocket attack. Suddenly the Zuni rocket streaked away from the fighter and into the target area.

"32's in the pop."

"There he is," Deuel said. I watched 32 roll over at the top of his quick climb and start down at the SAMs. Moments later, 32 fired one Zuni, then two more. Timing had been perfect. The whole attack sequence had lasted just a few seconds, certainly less than a minute from the time Deuel had fired his marker rockets. Exposure time to defensive ground fire in an actual situation would have been held to a minimum for both the FAC and the fighters, and the missile site target had been hit pretty hard.

Time now for us to go home—a long, slow flight back to Ontario, while the Marines continued to beat up the desert. It was a Friday afternoon, before a Guard drill weekend. Deuel would probably come back to this part of Mojave in his O-2 the next day. Later on, he would be coming back to perform the same job again, but from the ground. The FACs also train as ground controllers, directing fighter strikes from the Mark 108 jeep. Working with a Tactical Air Control and Communication Specialist who drives the jeep and maintains its radios, the FACs operate up front with Army units. The additional ground mission adds considerably to the FAC's training requirements.

Ironically, these Guard FACs probably will not mobilize with their O-2s in the event of a major conflict. At a recent Air Force Association meeting, Gen. John Pauly, Commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe, painted a rather gloomy picture of the improvements in Warsaw Pact defensive armaments. Gen. Pauly responded to my question of what role the airborne FAC would play in attacking these defenses by saying that the "FAC is still important," but Soviet improvements present a "difficult situation. It appears now that the FACS will end up in (Army) choppers," he said.

So why does the Air Force bear the cost of operating the O-2 squadrons? Said one pilot in the 196th, "I think they're doing it to keep as many pilots as possible current and familiar with the mission, and they're doing it in about the cheapest way possible. If there's a war, the Air Force has some trained FACs, but I don't think they'll use us in the O-2s. The airplane could not survive. I think they're keeping their options open.

Meanwhile, it looks as if the classical FAC, operating alone and unarmed over enemy territory, is slipping into history, a casualty of modern warfare. This suspicion is supported by a recently announced decision by the Tactical Air Command to deactivate one

of its last three remaining active duty O-2 squadrons, the 23rd TASS at Bergstrom AFB, Texas. Two of the unit's O-2s will remain in operational service, but the other 20 aircraft will be transferred to Davis-Monthan AFB in Arizona for reclamation.

COLOR Photographs of MILITARY Planes

Stressing Beauty, Action, Full Squadron and Rare Markings

- The Best of Many Collections.
- All Professional Quality.
- Many Super In-Flight Shots.
- Ideal for Enthusiasts, Hobbyists, Collectors and Flyers.
- Excellent for Collections, Gifts, Promotions, Nostalgia, and Decorations.
- \$ Back Guarantee if Photos are Returned Undamaged in 10 Days.
- Most U.S. & Foreign Planes Available.
- Order any 5 same size prints and a 6th same size print is free!
- Discount available for large orders and military units if requested on letterhead. Write for details.

Price (CA. add 6%)
 5x7 \$2.95 each 11x14 \$13.95 each
 8x10 ... \$5.95 each 16x20 \$28.95 each

Add \$2.00 for handling and postage for orders under \$50.00

Send your name, address, requests and alternate choices (types and squadron) with payment to:

CLOUD 9 PHOTOGRAPHY

Attn: AP
 4075 Main St. Suite 539
 Riverside, CA 92501



To enjoy these Beautiful Real Color Photographs. **ORDER TODAY.**

CIRCLE NO. 99 ON READER SERVICE CARD

A WORLD OF TRAINING AT SIERRA ACADEMY

PRIMARY • CORPORATE • AIRLINE • HELICOPTER

707 → 727 → 737

PILOT AND FLIGHT ENGINEER RATINGS USING FACILITIES OF



- Private Pilot thru 707, 727 & 737 type rating programs.
- Citation and Sabreliner turbojet instruction
- Basic flight, corporate, air carrier, and helicopter.
- Contract training — airline, corporation, government.
- Ideal training area adjacent to San Francisco.
- Honest assessment of aviation career opportunities.
- Approved for veterans — FAA approved training.
- Authorized to enroll non-immigrant alien students



SIERRA ACADEMY OF AERONAUTICS

OAKLAND INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT • OAKLAND, CA
 PHONE (415) 568-6100 • CABLE: ACADEMY

To: Sierra Academy of Aeronautics
 Oakland International Airport
 Oakland, California 94614

AP

Please send catalog(s) (Check)

Basic Flight Turbojet ATP Flight Engineer Rotary Wing

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____

Zip: _____

Age: _____

Interested in classes starting (month): _____

Previous experience, if any _____ Hrs _____

GI Bill qualified? _____ Financing required? _____

CIRCLE NO. 81 ON READER SERVICE CARD